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THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDUSTRIES IN LOUISIANA DURING THE FRENCH REGIME

1673 — 1763 [1]

In discussing the industrial development of the Mississippi valley during the French regime I shall deal only with agriculture, — first, because time will not permit a discussion of other French activities, and secondly, because the Mississippi valley is primarily agricultural.

The French people are practical; moreover, they were never enthusiastic colonizers; hence it was necessary to convince them that there were greater possibilities for them in Louisiana than in either Canada or France. This task fell to the missionaries, and the explorers, alert prospectors. Father Marquette begins the work with remarks on the excellence of the soil of the Mississippi valley, on the quantities of native fruits and vegetables, and on the ease with which wineries could be established. In 1676 Allouez reiterates all this, giving more details. Membré tells them: the soil is capable of providing all that can be desired for maintenance, even for a great colony; the climate is such that two crops can be grown annually; great herds of cattle, bearing a fine wool, scarcely inferior in quality to that grown upon the backs of sheep in France, graze upon vast prairies ready for the plow; hemp grows wild, — in quality superior to that produced in Canada, in quantity sufficient for all needed cordage; tar certainly can be made very near the sea; and finally, he has not had time to look for mines, but has found coal in several places; and the Indians have both lead and copper.

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[1] The facts for this paper were taken from: Transcripts, serie colonie C^{13}, B, and G 1 (recensements, concessions), and serie service hydrographique, especially vol. 67^{2}, nos. 8-16, and vol. 115^{10}, in the Library of congress; Jean, chevalier de Champigny, "Memoir of the present state of Louisiana," translated from the French in *Historical collections of Louisiana* (edited by Benjamin F. French — New York, 1846-1853), vol. 5; Kerlerec's report, 1756, printed in Marc, Baron de Villiers du Terrage, *Les dernières années de la Louisiane française: le chevalier de Kerlerec d'Abbadie, Aubry, Laussat* (Paris, 1904); *Découvertes et établissements des Français dans l'ouest et dans le sud de l'Amérique septentrionale, 1614-1754* (edited by Pierre Margry — Paris, 1876-1886); *The Jesuit relations and allied documents* (edited by Reuben G. Thwaites — Cleveland, 1896-1901); *Catholic historical publications*, vol. 10; Report of board of trade, 1721, published in *Documents relative to the colonial history of the state of New York* (edited by Edmund B. O'Callaghan — Albany, 1856-1887); and such well-known accounts of Louisiana as those of Bossu, Dumont, Du Pratz, Gravier, and La Harpe.

Douay, 1684-1688, who knew the valley better than any of the others quoted, is still more sweeping in his statements: Louisiana is the finest and most fertile country in the world; there are native foods in abundance for settlers; from the very time of arrival, a large family would have plenteous provisions, and in two years would be more at ease than anywhere in Europe; horses are to be had in plenty for every use, and so cheap that an Indian feels well paid when he receives an axe in exchange for a horse; Douay is sure sugar-cane can be grown, and can easily be introduced from the West Indies. He mentions the possibility of the grazing of sheep upon the prairies, and the development of a pearl industry on the gulf coast. The presence of mulberry trees in all the forests leads him to suggest the possibility of a silk industry.

Up to the very time of actual French settlement in both upper and lower Louisiana, such accounts frequently found their way to Canada and France. Argoud's relation (1697) restates all Douay said some ten years earlier, and adds these economic possibilities: a great lumber industry, ship timbers as fine as any in Norway, cedar and other colored woods for inlaid work (a commodity much needed in France) as beautiful as those found in Brazil, and the growing of both cotton and tobacco.

The period of purely economic prospecting ended about 1700. It would be difficult indeed to overstress the importance of this work or the facts that these men had had previous experience in Canada, and had spent most of their stay in the valley, in the generously fertile, healthful Illinois country, about which the churchmen could, with reasonable honesty, send those glowing "booster" accounts to Canada and France, making at least a few Frenchmen desirous to migrate to that earthly paradise.

Had the Mississippi been discovered by way of the gulf rather than the St. Lawrence, the writer is certain there would have been no French industries in Louisiana. The story of French colonization in warm climates, made with colonists drawn mainly from France herself, shows colonies that were early abandoned or had long drawn out infancies. Louisiana certainly would have had the former fate, but for the Canadian prospectors, and the Illinois country.

If the discovery had been made at the mouth of the river, the prospectors' accounts would have read like this: there are no good harbors; the whole coast is low, sandy, and sterile; the mouth of the Mississippi is clogged with deltas that make it hard for sea-going vessels to enter, and throughout its course navigation on this river is most difficult; between the coast and "beautiful prairies ready for the plow" are miles of lagoons and coastal swamps, beyond which are lands covered by a semi-tropical jungle that must be cleared and drained before they are ready even for a hoe; the climate is hot, and unhealthful in summer, making it impossible for men to work longer than two hours morning and evening in clearing and breaking ground; there are millions of mosquitoes that torture us day and night; pelts are very apt to decay before they can be shipped to France. Would such accounts have led Canadians, much less Frenchmen, to desire to migrate to Louisiana?

The two French attempts at settlement on the gulf coast were very similar both as to the make-up of the expeditions, and the choice of the site for settlement. La Salle failed. Iberville succeeded because the Biloxi settlement received Canadian reinforcements the first year, and because Bienville was able to force each man to prepare, to plant, and to tend a plot of ground, thereby saving the colonists from starvation. Gardens begun under pressure in 1704, but continued voluntarily, were in 1713 producing a surplus which was sold to the Spanish garrison at Pensacola. This trade continued to the end of the French regime, and down to 1717 was practically the only industry at Mobile, where it furnished the settlers with a little money with which to buy European supplies.

Market-gardening developed somewhat differently at New Orleans. The Company of the west instructed settlers to plant gardens. After a year or two the suggestion was disregarded by some, and by 1723, there were many who were procuring such supplies from the so-called "German coast," some thirty miles above New Orleans. The palisaded gardens and the truckpatches of these Germans provided cucumbers, salads, green peas and beans, artichokes, sweet-potato-greens, spinach, onions, pumpkins, dried peas and beans, French, Spanish, and English melons, sweet and white potatoes, and the water-melon, "the finest monument of the garden."

The products from these gardens, in 1731, besides the green vegetables, were three thousand barrels of potatoes, and one thousand of dried beans. On this coast in 1744 there were one hundred whites and two hundred blacks engaged in market-gardening, animal industry, and the making of butter and cheese. From 1750 to the end of French control the gardens were considered as belonging to the capital. Pointe Coupée, and other areas more distant, sent to New Orleans such supplies as dried peas and beans, pumpkins, and potatoes. Before the end of French control shipments of both dried peas and beans were made to the islands.

Notwithstanding that fruits and berries grew wild in Louisiana in great abundance, the French did much of the pioneer work in horticulture for the valley. They introduced the orange and lemon from Santo Domingo, the fig and pineapple from Provence, and the peach and two varieties of plums from Carolina. For these fruits they tested out the habitat and the methods of culture adapted to the new environment. Some consideration was given the olive, but the French did very little with this culture. Bienville, in all probability, was the first orange-grower in the Mississippi valley; he had in 1710 a fine grove on his plantation near the Mobile. By 1728 there were other beautiful orchards around Mobile and New Orleans. The French planted orange groves at no considerable distance north of New Orleans, and even there the trees were twice damaged by frost — in 1735 and 1748.

By 1728 the pineapple was cultivated quite extensively around New Orleans, and peach orchards were to be found in all the French settlements of the valley. Pears, plums, cherries, and apples were tried out in all localities. As far north as Natchez, the French found that such trees produced better wood than fruit. Even at Natchez, the fruit of the apple and pear was not so good as that grown in the Illinois country, where there were large apple orchards, usually containing a few pear trees.

The French cultivated grapes in all the settlements, but did nothing with the growing of berries.

The French brought wheat to Louisiana, and in that virgin, untried soil made test after test to find its proper habitat, finally demonstrating for all time, that the valley's best wheat areas lie north of the Ohio, and that, there, the fall sowings give the better results. The story of wheat growing in lower Louisiana begins with the patch Bienville planted at the Mississippi post in 1700. Flood, however, swept it away before it matured. Four years later Bienville again planted wheat, this time on his plantation near the Mobile, where he persistently sowed it year after year for ten years in the face of every kind of discouragement. As early as 1707 less courageous men had despaired; by 1711 few farmers were sanguine enough to assert that wheat could be successfully grown on the gulf coast, yet, as has been stated, the indefatigable Bienville went on planting wheat. Occasionally his patch escaped fogs during the maturing period and gave him a fair yield.

For the industrial development of Louisiana, the Company of the west placed the emphasis upon agriculture, especially upon wheat growing. Following the company's instructions, practically every farmer along the Mississippi and Red rivers in 1718 was growing a little wheat, and some good harvests were reported even below New Orleans. At Natchitoches they planted both a French and a Spanish red variety, the latter succeeding better. As late as 1735 this enthusiasm for wheat growing was but little abated, and not during the French period did the farmers cease to attempt to grow wheat in lower Louisiana. Rust was the growers' greatest obstacle; they tried many things in order to prevent it, but found nothing that could be relied upon.

In the Illinois country the French began the growing of wheat in 1687. This area, by 1721, was producing a surplus which, as flour, was shipped to New Orleans. Both wind- and horse-power flour mills were established, and in 1744 these mills had a surplus of over 800,000 pounds of flour. Two years later the Wabash settlements began to export wheat, and by 1750 the region above the Ohio was producing three times as much wheat, or wheat products, as was consumed there. Wheat culture in upper Louisiana increased rapidly during the last ten years of French control; many shipments of wheat products for war supplies were made to the upper Ohio garrisons, to Detroit, and to New Orleans during the French and Indian war.

The French did practically none of the pioneer work for the growing of corn in the Mississippi valley; this work had been done by the Indians before their arrival. Indian fashion, the French, in lower Louisiana, selected the land for a corn field, then girdled the trees, burned off the canes, and the following day planted the corn. On such a field a single stalk would usually yield five or six ears, and a negro could produce about three barrels of shelled corn per acre. In the Illinois country the yield was a thousand fold. Besides the Indian variety, the French cultivated several other kinds of corn, such as white, red, blue, yellow, wrinkled, flat, and also a species that enabled them to grow two crops annually on the same ground. By 1738 this excess was three times the amount consumed.

For the rice culture the French did all the pioneer work. They brought rice from Carolina, where it had been introduced from Madagascar in 1684; they tested for the mean temperature required, the length of season, and the kinds of soil best suited to it. In making the soil test, they planted it on wet bottom lands where they grew it without irrigation, upon higher ground with irrigation, and on uplands where they planted it in winter and grew it without irrigation. Each soil produced rice, but the best quality and yield came from the irrigated fields. By 1719 most lower Louisiana farmers were growing rice crops, and ten years later the same condition prevailed. The census of New Orleans for 1731 gives that year's rice crop as 53,000 barrels, 50,600 of which came from one plantation. The rice surplus like that of corn was disposed of in the French American islands.

Rice culture was profitable only when in conjunction with other crops; otherwise there was too much idleness for slaves. The small farmer, with a slave or two, usually coupled it with cotton, wheat, and tobacco, while the planter linked it with tobacco, indigo, and lumbering. Possibly as early as 1713, certainly in 1720, the French were growing in Louisiana a variety of cotton known as "white Siam." It was very white, but not so fine as the so-called "upland cotton." The French tried out cotton in all their settlements: the Illinois country was too cold; Vincennes, at thirty-nine degrees latitude, could grow cotton that would not mature in Carolina above thirty-six degrees. Ginning was a great handicap to the cotton growers. The French had several gins, but none with sufficient speed and perfection to stimulate cotton growing greatly.

A belief that the soil and climate of Louisiana was similar to that of Virginia led France to hope that her new colony would soon relieve her of her heavy English tobacco bill by producing what tobacco she needed. In 1713 a slump in the price of Virginia tobacco relieved the French purse, and simultaneously lessened her interest in Louisiana tobacco growing. This attitude of the French government had its effect upon the Louisiana farmers by causing them to slacken somewhat their activity in this industry. In a manner similar to that carried out for wheat and rice, soil and climatic conditions were tested for tobacco. The soil at Natchitoches, it was found, contained too much saltpeter to produce a good quality; the Illinois country had too short a season to insure maturing a crop; when the length of season permitted, an exceptionally fine quality of tobacco was produced at the Wabash settlements; Natchez grew good tobacco and gave a fine yield, but Pointe Coupée was the French tobacco field *par excellence* both as to quality and quantity. By way of pointing out the accuracy of the French work, it may be noted that the Pointe Coupée area still has some fame as to the quality of its tobacco, its yield is around 400 pounds per acre, and the old French method of preparing the tobacco for market is to some extent still in use.

Tobacco culture in Louisiana had some ups, but many downs. There were numerous natural pests to be overcome, freight troubles to be solved, and often there were seasons wholly unfavorable. Perhaps the heaviest blow received was in 1731, when the king became the sole buyer of Louisiana tobacco. Prices fell gradually for several years. This condition dampened the ardor of all growers for the culture and some of them gave up the industry. Others, however, kept on, and in 1735 Pointe Coupée shipped 100,000 pounds; in 1763, in spite of war conditions, Louisiana put on the market 180,000 pounds.

Notwithstanding the fact that none of the prospectors found indigo in Louisiana, it nevertheless grew there, and very soon the discovery of indigo meant to the French agriculturalists land with high productivity. The French made some experiments with the cultivation of wild indigo, alone, and also side by side with a variety that France had introduced earlier into her American islands from Hindostan. The foreign variety proved to be the better, and by 1720 was being grown on a number of Louisiana plantations.

Having determined upon the best variety of indigo, the French next took up the number of crops advisable to harvest annually from the same field. One, or at most two, in Louisiana equalled in quantity three in Santo Domingo, and excelled the island indigo in quality, being more copper colored and of a brighter hue. One slave, on fertile land, could grow from 50 to 70 pounds of indigo per acre.

By 1725 most Louisiana planters were growing indigo of the best quality, and in 1744 there were ten each of whom was producing annually 15,000 pounds. The growers struck their first real snag in 1747 when Carolina began to export indigo and England placed a bounty of six pence per pound on the Carolina product, which bounty enabled the English planters to double their equipment in three years. Just at this time a Spanish trade sprang up in Louisiana, because of the war. This trade dealt a staggering blow to all branches of agriculture by causing planters and farmers to neglect agriculture for trade. When the Spanish commerce suddenly ended in 1752, Louisiana was on the verge of ruin. Indigo growers weathered this economic storm and in 1762 put on the market 82,000 pounds of indigo, but succumbed when the colony was transferred to Spain, because this shut off their French market. The industry dragged on until 1793, when it was given up and the growing of cotton, sugar, and tobacco substituted.

About the middle of the seventeenth century France began to grow sugar-cane in her American islands; in 1725 she introduced all improved methods for making sugar. From Santo Domingo Iberville brought sugar-cane plants to Louisiana in 1700. As in the case of the other plants introduced, the French made experiments in order to find the proper Louisiana conditions for the sugar-cane, which they found did not thrive in a more severe climate than that of the environs of New Orleans. In 1730 a plan was worked out for the using of 325 whites and 1,900 blacks in growing sugar-cane in Louisiana; at this time the colony was producing about 2,500 pounds of sugar, annually, besides the molasses. Louisiana in 1751 had a few sugar-cane plantations and one planter who owned a sugar mill. Ten years later there were a number of such mills around the capital and New Orleans sugar and molasses were said to be of good quality.

The French introduced oats, barley, buckwheat, and millet, and tested out suitable Louisiana habitats for them. Hemp and flax grew wild and were mentioned by the prospectors as Mississippi valley economic possibilities, yet the French did nothing with them because in 1720 the French government prohibited the establishment of colonial industries competitive with those in France. Hemp and flax fell under this law. Hops grew wild in all parts of Louisiana, but were cultivated for commercial purposes. The French experimented with the vines, and found the hilly uplands best suited to hop growing.

The time element shuts out of the discussion the French land system, French agricultural methods, and agricultural implements, and permits a mere mention of other industries in which the French made contributions to the industrial development of the Mississippi valley, such as the making of pitch, tar, brick, silk, and wax, lumbering, stock raising, and the fur trade, which was responsible for the founding and early development of the city of St. Louis.

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